Motivation for the Adoption of Women’s Recreational Hockey Participation

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Leisure choices and involvement levels for both women and men are influenced by societal traditions and gender expectations (Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000; Carpenter & Acosta, 2006; Gill, 2002; Henderson, 1990). The strong physical nature, aggressiveness and male-dominated roots of hockey have traditionally made it a ‘male sport’ and a non-conforming and gender-inappropriate choice for women (Wiley et al., 2000; Theberge, 2003; Auster, 2008). In 1990, there were 8,146 female hockey players registered in Canada (Hockey Canada, 2011). The first International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) Women’s World Championship in 1990 ignited an unprecedented surge in female hockey participation that was further motivated by the debut of women’s hockey as an Olympic sport at the 1998 Olympic Winter Games. Since 2000, Canadian registration has increased by 67.5% with well over 85,000 female players currently registered to play hockey in Canada (Hockey Canada, 2011). Some suggest that much of this increase has resulted from a migration of players from ringette, an ice sport similar to hockey, however registration numbers for ringette have also increased from 25,000 in 1999-2000 to 29,000 in 2010-2011 (Ringette Canada, 2011). Similar interest in female hockey is observed in the United States (US) where over 65,000 players are registered with USA Hockey (USA Hockey, 2011). According to the 2011 IIHF Survey of Players, there are 176,297 registered female players worldwide. Canada and the US are the undeniable powerhouses of female hockey with a combined total of 151,436 players or 86% of all female hockey players.

Although Hockey Canada’s participation figures typically capture only youth and high performance players, growth is also observed in older female populations. Indeed, the adoption of the female game of hockey is not only occurring at the youth level but is also sparking a strong interest with more mature women who in many cases have little to no youth experience playing the game. For instance, in the small test community of this study, the local women’s recreational hockey league was introduced in 2009 with 65 registered players. In 2010, registration increased to 75 and the most recent 2011-2012 season has attracted 98 players (+51%). A further offering for novice players this season is a Hockey for Women Beginners program with 38 registered participants. Similar trends of women’s recreational hockey leagues attracting a large number of beginner players are observed in communities across Canada. In addition to the uncertainty around the number of adult women picking up ice hockey, little is known about the motivations attracting this segment of women recreational hockey players, which is the purpose of this research.

The literature provides some important direction for this research. Notably, Auster (2008) examined the effect of age cohort on women’s choice to play collegiate ice hockey. In comparing the experiences and participation influences of three age cohorts of women, the study concluded that cohort effects were in fact evident. Younger players (born 2000-2009) started playing hockey at an earlier age, had exposure to more team sports and benefited from the support and influence of a greater variety of significant others (namely family and friends who often also played hockey). Older players faced more challenges in their hockey journeys including opportunities to play, the availability of proper female equipment, and the support of significant others. Younger players clearly benefited from an enriched social environment that supported and encouraged participation. This study considered strictly the experience of collegiate level players and not recreational players.

A second important study, Wiley et al., (2000) compared the leisure involvement profiles of women and men recreational hockey players from three perspectives; attraction, self-expression, and centrality. A key finding of this study was that although male players had higher centrality scores than women (i.e. hockey was a priority in their lives), women players had the highest sport-attraction scores. These authors suggest that men’s centrality scores are driven by a more supportive social environment while conflicting demands for women’s time and limited playing opportunities may push women’s centrality measures down. Women’s high sport attraction results are explained by the value women place on the pleasure and enjoyment of sport (versus competition) as well as the possible influence of the novelty of their new found passion for the game of hockey. It is suggested by the authors that with time, women’s attraction scores may level off. This study supports the position that leisure involvement may be influenced...
by societal ideologies as well as individual interests and preferences.

Given that hockey is a statistically male-dominated sport, coupled with the high cost and steep skill learning curve, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that are motivating women with little youth hockey experience to adopt this sport. A sample of 100 recreational women hockey players from a Northern Ontario (Canada) community are surveyed to measure variables including length of hockey participation, key influences and influencers, perceived benefits, participation challenges, child effect, and broader sport participation and spectatorship. The findings from this study offer multiple applications in the areas of leisure involvement and women's sport participation, sport marketing and sponsorship. They also provide insight into decisions of older athletes to begin participating in a given sport. This has implications for sport managers and marketers. For sport and non-sport marketers in particular, who are increasingly keen on understanding the behavior of the powerful women consumer, results provide further details about how sports are a growing area of relevance to women and therefore represent a compelling platform to engage these consumers. Specific recommendations with respect to women's hockey are provided based on the results of the study which, in turn offer direction on enhancing the understanding and appreciation for the 'product' of female hockey and the sponsorship appeal of this growing property for sport (e.g., equipment manufacturers) and non-sport (e.g. banks, women's apparel) corporations.